

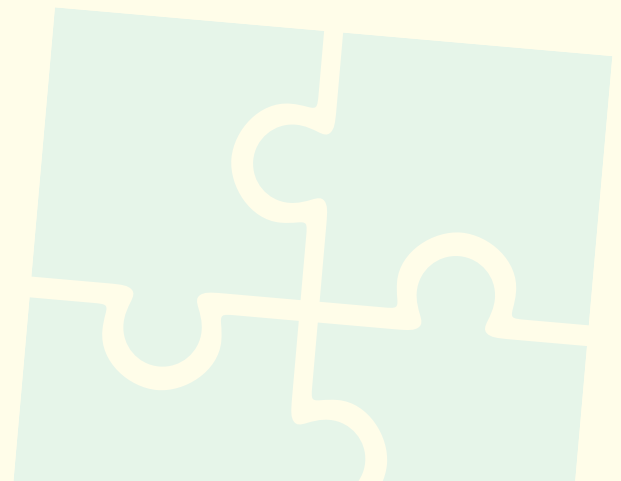
Chapter 13

Finding Friendship: Online Communities



Overview

We all know how satisfying it can be to belong to a community. For many, their school and neighborhood communities are at the center of their lives. In this chapter, you will learn about a different type of community—online communities—and examine their positive and negative aspects. Included is a review of the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy online relationships, as well as a discussion of the importance of taking your audience into account when writing online communications.



Key Terms

- Community
- Kinship

Joining a Community

You may have heard people talk about *community* and wondered whether the word applied to your life. Happily, it does! A **community** is the coming together of different people who share a particular place or have similar characteristics. Each of us is a member of many different communities. You are a member of your school community, your neighborhood community, and the community of your town or city. You might belong to an academic team, sports team, musical group, or gaming club.

Just as we join communities in real life, we can also join communities online. In truth, many websites can be classified as online communities. The only criteria for being “counted” as an online community are that the website’s users have common interests and communicate online. The most common ways to become part of an online community are joining forums and chat rooms; participating in social networking sites and online gaming; and using other online communication tools to connect with others through shared interests.

If its users have common interests and communicate online, then it’s an online community.





Be Respectful, Responsible, and Real

Each time we go online, we make choices. We can choose to be a good friend and a good listener, or we can choose the opposite. **To help make wise choices online, ask yourself the following questions:**

- 1 Is my behavior *hurtful*?
- 2 Is my behavior *helpful*?

If you're ever not sure what is acceptable and safe to share with an online community, ask yourself the key questions shown below:

1 Is it respectful?

If the comment is disrespectful or offensive, you should not share it. For example, you should not use cruel language to tell someone that his or her idea won't work. Find a kind way to suggest another direction.

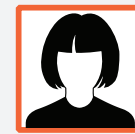
2 Is it responsible?

Ask yourself if sharing the information is a responsible action. For example, telling a stranger your home address is not responsible, because that action could expose you and your family to danger. Sharing an opinion about a movie you recently watched, however, is acceptable information to share, because it does not expose you to any security risks.

3 Is it real?

Make sure that you resist the temptation to embellish the information you give members of your online community. Share your real self to avoid creating a false online identity.

Fact!



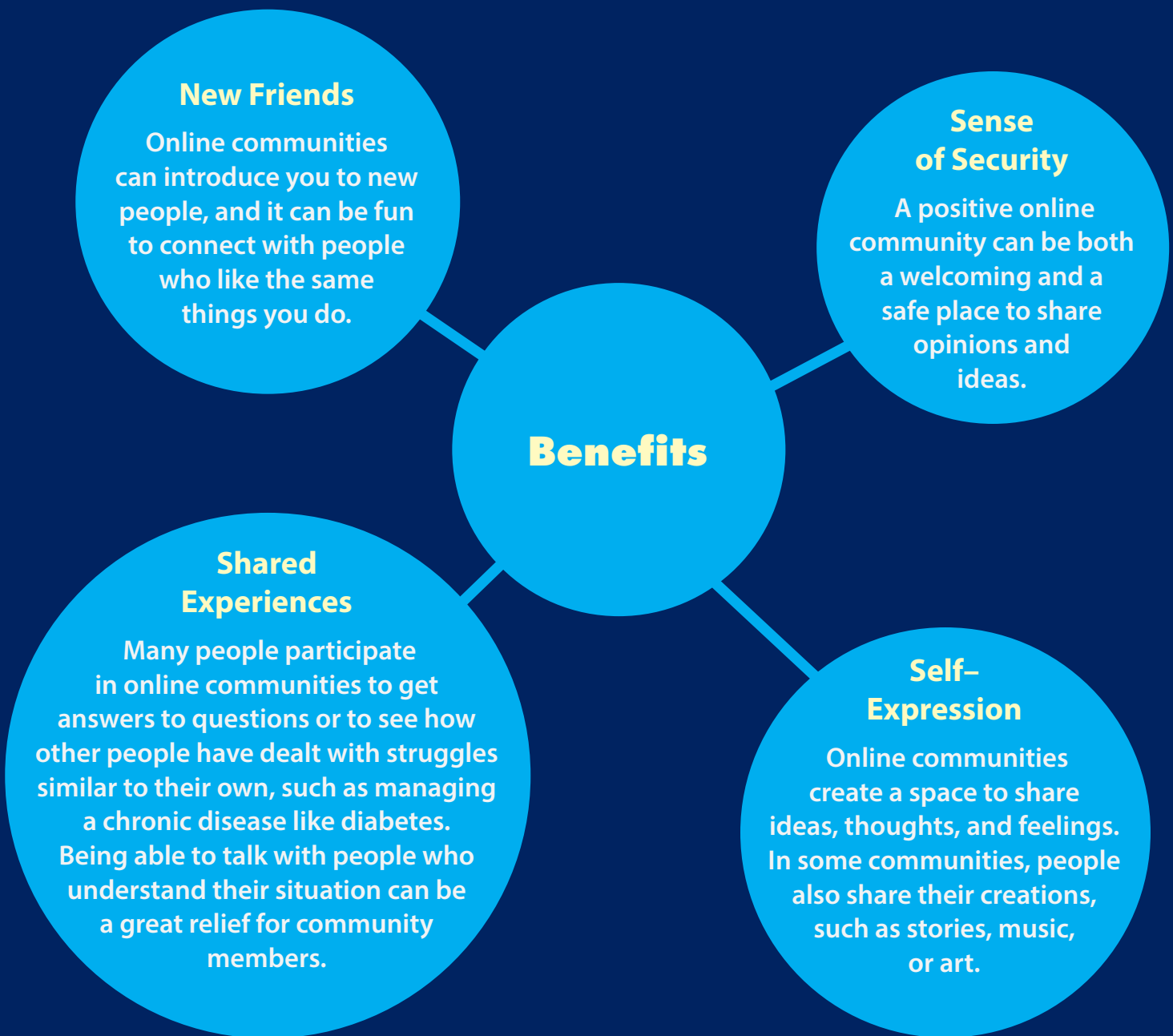
Did You Know?

Some colleges and universities now offer bachelor's and master's degrees in the creation of online communities and other social media.

Source: *The Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California*

Positive Aspects of Online Communities

Popular online communities include Twitter and Facebook, both of which exist because people use them to communicate with one another. Online communities have great power to unite people with shared interests around the world; connect those who want to discuss comparable ideas or debate differing opinions; and create a platform to develop friendships. Online communities can provide a great sense of **kinship**, or an affinity between people who share common characteristics.



Negative Aspects of Online Communities

Although there are many benefits of belonging to an online community, there are also some drawbacks.



Cyberbullying

In online communities where diverse groups of people are exchanging ideas, people sometimes lose their tempers and resort to flaming and trolling. In some cases, the harassment escalates to cyberbullying.

Unethical Behavior

Members of online communities sometimes engage in unethical behaviors, such as sharing copyrighted material without paying for it and without the permission of the material's creator.

Drawbacks

Oversharing

Some members of online communities may share too much personal information. This can lead to embarrassment for them and for others. They might even expose themselves to potential security threats, such as identity theft.

False Identities

While we can build positive relationships online, it's important to be cautious when you are considering whether to trust other community members. Sometimes people present themselves falsely or embellish information. Remember that some people you meet online may not be who they claim to be.

Fact!



Did You Know?

According to a 2013 study, 42% of adults who use social media use more than one site to keep in touch with family, friends, and other contacts. Facebook is the most popular, but many adults also use LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest, and Twitter.

Source: Pew Research Internet Project

Audience, Purpose, and Language

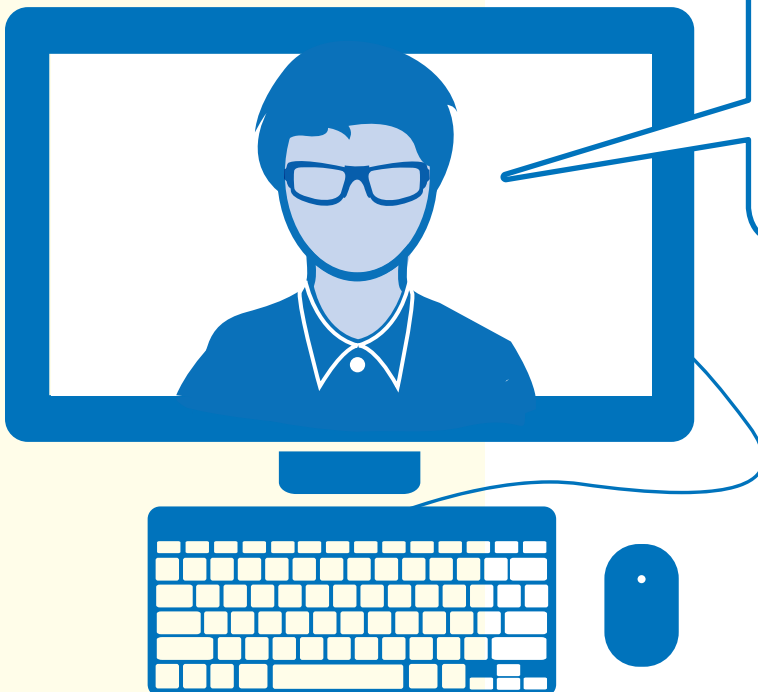
We all communicate differently in different environments. Think about the way you would ask a teacher for help versus the way you would ask a friend if he wants to go to the movies Friday night. In the first instance, you would use more formal language, while in the second instance, you could use informal language, including slang.

Just as we modify our language to match our audience when we communicate face to face, we must also consider our audience when we communicate online. Here's another example: Say that you're researching sedimentary rocks for a school project, and you connect with a subject expert in an online forum. You would approach the communication in a polite and formal way, using complete sentences, correct spelling, and an appropriate greeting. Now, consider how you might communicate with a friend in an online chat room about a video game. Would you abbreviate or use texting lingo? What about emoticons?

Whenever we communicate in the online world, it's important to consider who our audience is and what our purpose is for communicating. Both audience and purpose impact the language and the level of formality we use, which ultimately determine if we are being respectful and responsible online participants.

Remember:

Just as we modify our language to match our audience when we communicate face to face, we must also consider our audience when we communicate online.

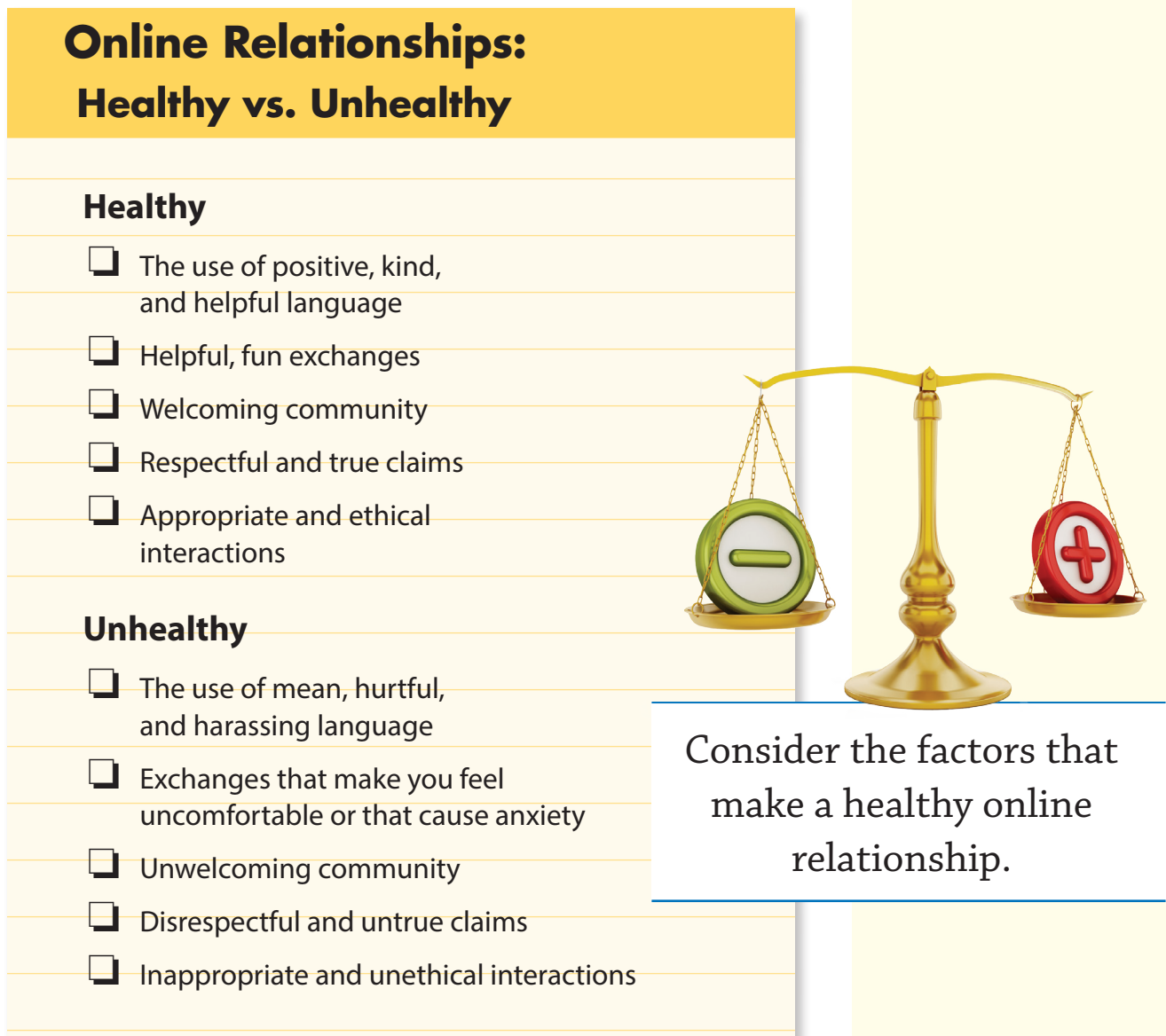




Online Relationships

Forming relationships with other people online can be an exciting and interesting adventure. Whether you are getting to know someone from school better by joining the same social network or you are meeting someone new with shared interests in an online community, it's important to consider what makes an online relationship a healthy one. Review **Figure 13.1** for details on the factors that characterize positive and negative online relationships.

Figure 13.1



Chapter 13 Assessment

What Do You Think?

Write a two-paragraph reflection on how you can form positive online relationships. Your paragraphs should answer the following questions:

- 1 What value can online communities bring to your life?
- 2 How can you enjoy online communities while avoiding potential risks?
- 3 Why should you avoid creating a false identity when participating in an online community?
- 4 Why should you take audience into consideration when you are communicating online?

Challenge: What Would You Do?

In this chapter, you learned about online communities and relationships. Now, apply what you have learned. Read the situations below. For each, write one paragraph explaining what you would do if faced with a similar situation. Use what you have learned in the chapter to justify your reasoning.

1 One day, when you check your account on a social media website, you see that a stranger wants to be added to your list of contacts.
What would you do?

2 You are on the website of an online community, contributing to the discussion of a controversial topic, when another contributor becomes angry about something you wrote. He posts an angry comment that attacks your character.
What would you do?

3 You want to ask your supervisor at your after-school job for a letter of reference for a college application. You decide to communicate with her online. A friend says that you should just send her a quick, informal text. You are not so sure this is the right way to make your request.
What would you do?



Extension Activities



Activity 1 Short Answer

Write a one- or two-sentence response to each of the prompts below.

- 1 Define the term *online community*.
- 2 Describe the positive aspects of participating in online communities.
- 3 Discuss the negative aspects of participating in online communities.
- 4 Identify the three questions you can ask to differentiate between helpful and hurtful online behavior.
- 5 Explain the differences between healthy and unhealthy online relationships.

Activity 2 Multiple Choice

Read the questions below. Use what you have learned in this chapter to help you choose the correct answer.

- 1 What is a community?
 - A. It's always negative, and it's something in which you shouldn't participate.
 - B. It's the coming together of different people who share a common purpose.
 - C. It's different people who ask for your personal information.
- 2 Which of the following is NOT an aspect of a healthy online relationship?
 - A. Kind language
 - B. Respectful dialogue
 - C. Opinions that are expressed in a hurtful way

continued



Extension Activities

Activity 2 Multiple Choice, *continued*

- 3 Which of the following is NOT a responsible online behavior?
 - A. Sharing your cell phone number with your entire online community
 - B. Sharing your thoughts on a band's new song with a member of your online community whom you just met
 - C. Sharing ways to improve your soccer skills with old and new members of your online soccer community

- 4 Which of the following describes an unhealthy online relationship?
 - A. It includes ethical behavior.
 - B. It builds trust between friends.
 - C. It may make you feel uncomfortable.

- 5 Why is oversharing a negative aspect of participating in an online community?
 - A. It can expose you to identity theft.
 - B. It can cause others to want to be your friend.
 - C. It can spur you to create a false identity.



Activity 3 Online Communication

The way we communicate differs depending on the circumstances and the person with whom we are communicating. In this activity, you'll put your online communication skills to the test by writing three email messages.

Imagine that you have a big math test coming up next week, and you're not sure you understand some of the geometry concepts that will be on it. You want to ask for help from a friend; your math teacher; and your soccer coach, who has a degree in math.

Write a brief email message to each of your three contacts, asking for help. Remember to change your communication techniques based on your audience. After you are done writing your emails, share them with a classmate. Critique each other's emails. Discuss the level of formality each type of audience should receive. Talk about how to achieve the different levels of formality with sentence structure, grammar, spelling, and punctuation.



Hands-On

Cyber Shield

Using a computer design program or a piece of paper and colored pencils, draw a shield similar to the one shown in **Figure 13.2**. Label the shield with tips for safe online community interactions, including descriptions and a brief explanation for each tip. Make sure you include at least five tips.

Figure 13.2

